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DEFINITION OF GOD

It is always more easy to criticize the work of another than to improve upon it. Hence it is with some diffidence that I make these remarks upon the definition of God contained in the article "Definition of Religion" in *The Monist* for October, 1904. Nevertheless that definition that "God is the highest authority for moral conduct" appears to me so far from the truth that I feel compelled to protest against it.

The Christian idea of God is derived from the Bible. Here we first meet it in the form of a powerful being represented as creating the heaven and the earth, plants, animals, and men. This idea was never given up by Jews or Christians. Jeremiah represents God as saying, "Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee," and Jesus says, "If God so clothe the grass of the field etc., shall he not much more clothe you?" It is evident, therefore, that the idea of God as Creator is an essential part of the God-idea in Christianity. It is also a part of the idea of God in Mohammedanism, *vide* Koran, chap. iv: "O men, fear your Lord, who hath created you out of one man, and out of him created his wife, and from them two hath multiplied men and women." The same idea occurs in Hinduism, where God is called Brahma, the Creator, and by other names as Jaganath, Visvesvara, etc. with a similar signification.

It appears to me on analyzing the popular conception of God that it may be resolved into two distinct portions. The first is the idea of God as Creator and sustainer of all things. This idea is prominent in Old Testament theology, in Mahomedanism, in Brahman and Saivite Hinduism, in the Persian religion, and in many others. But a second idea is also sometimes present. This is the ethical ideal. In some religions these two ideas are combined; in others they are kept separate. They are combined in Christianity, where Jesus, the ethical ideal, is confused with Yahveh, the Creator. They are combined in Vaishnava theology, where Vishnu, the ruler of the world, is confounded with his incarnations Krishna and Rama. But they are separate in Buddhism, where Buddha is worshiped (if at all) as the ethical ideal, while the first idea of God as Creator is omitted and denied. But it must be noted that the idea of God as Creator is found in Thibetan Buddhism where Siva takes the place occupied by Yahveh in the Christian Trinity.

Thus it is possible to divide religions into three classes, (*a*) where the idea of God as Creator predominates, as in Judaism, Mahomedanism, Zoroastrianism, Brahmanism, Saivism, etc.; (*b*) where the idea of God as the ideal man prevails, as in Buddhism; and (*c*) where these two ideas both exist and coalesce, as in Christianity, Thibetan Buddhism, and Vaishnavism. It should be observed that as a real man is preferable to an ideal one as a model for imitation, so those religions which conceive God as an ideal man

always represent him in the form of a real one, as Christianity (Jesus) Buddhism (Gautama), and Vaishnavism (Krishna and Rama).

It should also be remarked that the founder of each religion is always considered the real highest authority for moral conduct. Thus Moses was the highest ethical authority for the Jews, Jesus for the Christians, Mahomet for the Mahomedans, and Gautama for the Buddhists. Nevertheless only Jesus and Gautama Buddha have been worshiped as God, and primitive Christians and primitive Buddhists did not do this. The worship of the supreme ethical authority, or moral ideal as God is a corruption therefore, and not true religion. From all of which it is evident that the idea of God as Creator is the essential one to religion, and the idea of God as perfect man and supreme moral authority is a secondary one and not sanctioned by the highest religious authorities.

It may be objected that the prophets Moses, Jesus, and Mohamet always ascribed their moral doctrines to God, and that therefore we should do so likewise. But this is not altogether true. Each prophet ascribed his call to God, and claimed the sanction of God to his doctrines, but not much more. Jesus used to say, "It was said of them of old time so and so, but *I* say unto you so and so." Obviously therefore he was his own supreme ethical authority. This is even more apparent in the case of Gautama Buddha. Mahomet also altered his precepts from time to time according to circumstances, which he would not have done had he believed them to be divine. Therefore we must suppose that the supreme ethical authority of the prophets was not God, but the opinion held by each as to what course of conduct was best for his followers and the human race. Surely then it must be evident that the idea of God as Creator is the most important one.

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